

INDUCTION MELTING FURNACE WITH METERED DISCHARGE

Cross Reference To Related Applications

[0001] This application is a division of U.S. Application No. 10/200,358, filed July 22, 2002, which claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application No. 60/307,200, filed July 23, 2001, and U.S. Provisional Application No. 60/352,979 filed January 30, 2002, the entirety of each of which are incorporated herein by reference.

Field of the Invention

[0002] The present invention generally relates to electric induction melting furnaces, and more particularly to a multi-chamber furnace wherein a molten composition, or melt, is heated and optionally melted in a first chamber, and a metered quantity of the melt is discharged from a second chamber.

Background of the Invention

[0003] Handling and melting a material that burns in the presence of oxygen, such as a magnesium based composition, presents special process control problems. For example, at around 435°C (nominal incipient melt temperature) and above, molten magnesium reacts violently with air by combustion supported by oxygen in the air. At the same time, these types of alloys are finding increased use. For example, in the automotive industry, lightweight magnesium alloy components, die cast or otherwise produced, provide a lighter vehicle with a higher fuel economy.

[0004] Early induction melting of magnesium alloys was typically accomplished in an induction furnace of the type illustrated in FIG. 1. Furnace 100 comprises a crucible 102, thermal insulation 103, induction coils 104a, 104b and 104c, magnetic shunt assembly 108, and tilting mechanism 110. Crucible 102 was formed from a material that would not chemically react with the molten magnesium alloy 112 in the crucible. An open space 114 was provided between crucible 102 and thermal insulation 103 to allow for the drainage of

any molten material that might leak from the crucible. The leakage could be removed from the furnace by removing plug **116** and draining the material. Coils **104a**, **104b** and **104c** were individually controlled, and were powered from a utility source operating at 50 or 60 Hertz.

The general configuration of the interior of the cylindrical crucible was a relatively large

5 height and a small diameter since magnetic coupling of the field generated by current flowing in the coils was mainly with the crucible **102**, although some magnetic flux penetrated into the molten magnesium alloy (melt) to provide a relatively small amount of direct induction heating and magnetic stirring of the melt. However, most heating of the melt was

accomplished by conduction from the inductively heated crucible **102**. Coils **104a**, **104b**

10 and **104c** were selectively energized on the basis of the height of the melt in the crucible at any given time. Magnesium alloy billets were used as feedstock for the furnace and lowered into the melt by a suitable transport system. The furnace operated as a hot heel furnace in which a minimum amount (heel) of molten magnesium alloy was always left in the crucible

to facilitate the conduction heating of a billet that was added to the crucible. As mentioned

15 above, molten magnesium reacts violently with oxygen in the air. Consequently, either a cover flux or protective atmosphere was placed over the exposed surface of the melt. Cover

fluxes are low melting mixtures of salts that melt and flow over the surface of the melt to form a film that reduces vaporization and oxidation. However, fluxes create a corrosive atmosphere and can cause corrosion problems in castings that are poured from the molten

20 magnesium alloy. Protective atmospheres are generally mixtures of air with sulfur dioxide, or carbon dioxide and/or sulfur hexafluoride, and are commonly used to modify the oxide

film formed on the surface of the melt to suppress vaporization and further oxidation. As an alternative to using a protective atmosphere to form a surface oxide coating, an inert gas,

such as argon or helium (provided that the protective volume is enclosed for this lighter than

25 air gas), can be used to prevent magnesium from burning by excluding air from the surface of the melt. Tilting mechanism **110** was used to pour the melt from the crucible for casting.

The pour, and also the addition of feedstock billets, must be very carefully performed to

minimize disturbance of the protective flux or atmosphere that is provided over the surface of the melt in the crucible. In an alternative method for tapping the melt, a siphon tube is

30 immersed in the melt to draw a volume of molten magnesium alloy for a casting pour.

However, the siphon tube process requires penetration of the melt's surface. Further, the

weight of the tube and the melt contained in the siphon presents a significant handling task in movement of the tube from within the melt to a receptacle in which the melt is released.

[0005] U.S. Patent No. 5,908,488 (the 488 patent), entitled *Magnesium Melting Furnace and Method for Melting Magnesium*, illustrates another approach to melting and pouring

5 magnesium for a casting operation. The furnace (1) in the 488 patent, which is configured to operate as a combustion furnace, comprises a horizontally oriented multi-chambered furnace consisting of a melting chamber (2), a holding chamber (4) and a meter chamber (6). Magnesium feedstock is added to the melting chamber in which it melts and flows to the holding chamber. In the holding chamber, impurities filter out of the melt and the
10 magnesium melt flows to the meter chamber. A protective atmosphere of an air/sulfur hexafluoride mixture is used over the surfaces of the melt in the chambers. A mechanical metering pump (27) lifts molten metal out of the meter chamber and into a transfer pipe (28) that transfers the melt to a die casting machine or a transport container. The mechanical metering pump represents an improvement over pouring or siphoning the molten magnesium
15 from the furnace but introduces a mechanical component that is subjected to a harsh operating environment and is largely recognized as practically ineffective, expensive, unreliable and, consequently, in need of frequent maintenance.

[0006] It is an object of the present invention to provide an induction furnace that will safely melt and heat molten metals, including molten metals that react violently with air, and
20 provide a metered draw of the melt from the furnace in a clean and efficient manner.

Brief Summary of the Invention

[0007] In one aspect, the present invention is an apparatus for, and method of, heating a melt in a furnace and providing a metered discharge of the melt from the furnace. The furnace comprises a melt chamber and a meter chamber that are interconnected by a passage.

25 [0008] In one example of the invention, a melt chamber stopper means can either allow or inhibit flow of the melt between the melt and meter chambers through the connecting passage. In another example of the invention, a valve is used to either allow or inhibit flow of the melt between the melt and meter chambers through the connecting passage. In one

example of the invention, a meter chamber stopper means can either allow or inhibit flow of a metered discharge of the melt from the furnace. In another example of the invention, a valve is used to either allow or inhibit flow of a metered discharge of the melt from the furnace.

5 [0009] In one example of the present invention, a meter chamber stopper rod that is connected to the meter chamber stopper means is disposed within a melt chamber stopper rod that is connected to the melt chamber stopper means, and the space between the meter chamber stopper rod and melt chamber stopper rod provides a flow path for a gas that is injected into the melt in the furnace. When the furnace is in the heating state, flow of melt
10 between the melt and meter chambers is allowed, and flow of a metered discharge of the melt from the furnace is inhibited. In this state, the injected gas bubbles through the melt in the melt chamber to the space above the surface of the melt in the melt chamber where it collects to form a protective gas blanket over the melt from oxygen in the air. When the furnace is in the metered discharge state, flow of melt between the melt and meter chambers is inhibited,
15 and flow of a metered discharge of the melt from the furnace is allowed. In this state, the injected gas flows into the meter chamber to flush the metered volume of melt from the chamber.

[0010] In the example of the present invention wherein valves are used to control the flow of the melt, gas is injected into the melt chamber and meter chamber by a controlled gas supply
20 system. Means for supplying feedstock to the melt chamber are also provided. Other aspects of the invention are set forth in this specification and the appended claims.

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0011] For the purpose of illustrating the invention, there is shown in the drawings a form that is presently preferred; it being understood, however, that this invention is not limited to
25 the precise arrangements and instrumentalities shown.

[0012] FIG. 1 is a cross sectional view of a prior art induction furnace that is of particular use in melting magnesium alloys.

[0013] FIG. 2 is a cross sectional view of one example of the induction melting furnace of the present invention with the connecting passage between the melt and meter chambers open and the outlet passage from the meter chamber closed.

5 [0014] FIG. 3 is a cross sectional view of one example of the induction melting furnace of the present invention with the connecting passage between the melt and meter chambers closed and the outlet passage from the meter chamber open.

[0015] FIG. 4 is a cross sectional view of another example of the induction melting furnace of the present invention illustrating an optional meter chamber volume adjusting element.

10 [0016] FIG. 5 is a cross sectional view of another example of the induction melting furnace of the present invention illustrating an alternate method of injecting a gas into the furnace.

[0017] FIG. 6 is a cross sectional view of another example of the induction melting furnace of the present invention illustrating one example of a feedstock feeder for the furnace.

[0018] FIG. 7 is a cross sectional view of one example of a feedstock feeder and automated feedstock loader for one example of the induction melting furnace of the present invention.

15 [0019] FIG. 8 is a cross sectional view of another example of the induction melting furnace of the present invention.

Detailed Description of the Invention

[0020] Referring now to the drawings, wherein like numerals indicate like elements there is shown in FIG. 2 and FIG. 3 one example of an induction melting furnace 10 of the present invention. The furnace comprises two chambers, namely melt chamber 12 and meter chamber 14. When the melt is a magnesium based alloy, such as the general casting magnesium alloy AZ91, one suitable non-reacting material for the chambers is a stainless steel, which is also an electrically conductive material. Induction coil 16 is disposed around the furnace. The coil is connected to a suitable ac power source (not shown in the drawings) so that the magnetic field generated from ac current flowing through the coil inductively heats the melt chamber and the meter chamber, when they are constructed of electrically

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conductive material, and/or inductively heats the melt when it is an electrically conductive material. In examples wherein the material of a chamber is electrically conductive, the chamber is inductively heated, and the induced heat is conducted into the melt to heat the melt. For a melt such as a magnesium based alloy, an appreciable amount of the induced heating is in the chamber material, although there is also some induced heating of the melt. In other examples of the invention, most, if not all, induced heating may occur in the melt when the melt is an electrically conductive material, and the chambers are constructed from non-electrically conductive materials. The illustrated configuration of the furnace is a non-limiting example of a suitable two-chamber furnace for practicing the invention. A layer of thermal insulation **18**, such as an air-bubbled ceramic composition, can be placed around the exterior of the furnace to retain heat within the furnace. The layer may also serve as an electrical insulator between the furnace and the coil. In some embodiments, the induction coil may consist of multiple induction coils, some of which may be connected to an adjustable frequency power source to provide time and intensity variable heating zones and/or electromechanical stirring of the melt in either or both chambers. Additionally one or more induction coils may partially surround regions of the melt chamber and/or the meter chamber, and be powered from one or more suitable power supplies. The coils may be air-cooled or water-cooled, and may consist of solid or stranded conductors configured in what is commonly known as Litz wire.

[0021] Interconnecting passage **20** is provided between the melt and meter chambers. In this non-limiting example, the passage is formed by melt chamber nozzle **22**. The walls of melt chamber nozzle **22** rise above the base of melt chamber **12** to assist in preventing settled particulate from flowing into the meter chamber through passage **20**. Filter screens or other filtering means may be provided to serve a similar function.

[0022] As shown in **FIG. 2**, melt chamber stopper **24** (spherically shaped in this non-limiting example) is in the raised position to allow free transfer of the melt through passage **20**, and the free transfer of circulation heat in the melt throughout the two chambers. In **FIG. 2**, meter chamber stopper **26** (also spherically shaped in this non-limiting example) is in the lowered position to seat on meter chamber nozzle **28**, which prevents discharge of

melt from the meter chamber through outlet passage 30. In this non-limiting example, meter chamber nozzle 28 is of similar construct as melt chamber nozzle 22. Meter chamber stopper rod 26a is disposed within melt chamber stopper rod 24a. Volume 60 defines a space between the melt chamber stopper rod and meter chamber stopper rod that forms a path for gas from gas supply 62 via connecting element 64. A non-limiting choice of gas is an inert gas, such as argon. Either the gas supply and associated connecting element 64 are commonly mounted with melt chamber stopper rod 24a so that it travels with the motion of the stopper rod, or a flexible connecting element 64 is provided to allow travel of the stopper rod while the gas supply remains fixed. Sealing element 68 prevents the escape of gas to atmosphere from volume 60. Gas travels down volume 60 and exits into the melt chamber from the melt chamber stopper 24 at region 66. Gas is supplied at a pressure that is greater than the static pressure of the melt at region 66 so that the gas bubbles up through the melt in the melt chamber and collects over the surface of the melt. Lid 32 may be provided for greater retention of the gas over the surface of the melt. Generally, but not necessarily, the lid is not gas tight to avoid the build up of excessive gas pressures within the melt chamber. Alternatively venting may be accomplished with a sealed lid, appropriate vent conduit and control valve for venting the gas to atmosphere, or reclamation and recycling to the gas supply. If the melt burns in oxygen, such as a magnesium based composition, the layer of a non-oxygen containing gas, such as argon, will prevent ignition of the melt. Raising and lowering means 40 raises or lowers the melt chamber stopper rod and stopper, and raising and lowering means 42 raises or lowers the meter chamber stopper rod and stopper. The raising or lowering of the melt chamber stopper rod and stopper can be accomplished independently of the raising or lowering of the meter chamber stopper rod and stopper. Each raising and lowering means is diagrammatically shown as a weight and lever arrangement. In practice, any suitable drive system can be used as a stopper raising and lowering means.

[0023] FIG. 2 illustrates the melting and heating state of furnace 10. FIG. 3 illustrates the metered pour state of furnace 10. In FIG. 3, melt chamber stopper 24 is in the lowered position and seated on melt chamber nozzle 22 to inhibit flow of melt from melt chamber 12 into the meter chamber 14. Meter chamber stopper 26 is in the raised position to allow the discharge of a measured melt (based on the volume of the meter chamber) in the meter

chamber through outlet passage 30 into a suitable container (not shown in the figure), such as a die casting apparatus, casting mold or ladle. In the metered pour state, gas releases from region 66 into meter chamber 14. The release of pressurized gas into the meter chamber flushes the melt in the meter chamber through outlet passage 30. Transition from the melting and heating state to the metered pour state is accomplished by first lowering melt chamber stopper 24 to seat on melt chamber nozzle 22, and then raising meter chamber stopper 26. Conversely, in transition from the metered pour state to the melting and heating state, meter chamber stopper 26 is lowered to seat on meter chamber nozzle 28, and then melt chamber stopper 24 is raised. Meter chamber stopper 26 represents one example of a means for controlling the flow of the melt through the connecting passage between the melt chamber and the meter chamber, and melt chamber stopper 24 represents one method of controlling the discharge of the melt through outlet passage 30.

[0024] FIG. 4 illustrates the use of an optional meter chamber volume adjusting element 44 that is integral with furnace 10 in this non-limiting example of the invention. By lowering chamber volume adjusting element 44 into meter chamber 14, the volume in meter chamber 14 is reduced. Conversely, by raising chamber volume adjusting element out of meter chamber 14, the volume in meter chamber 14 is increased. In this fashion, the metered discharge volume, or shot, of melt that is released from the meter chamber can be precisely controlled. In this non-limiting example, the meter chamber volume adjusting element 44 comprises a threaded plug that is seated in the boundary wall between the melt and meter chambers. The threaded connection forms a liquid tight seal between the two chambers. The plug may be raised or lowered, either manually or automatically, by a rotating control rod (not shown in the figure) that penetrates a furnace boundary, such as the base, wall or lid. The rod may be either permanently or temporarily installed in the furnace. Alternatively, a remotely controlled actuator can be installed on the volume adjusting element.

[0025] FIG. 5 illustrates one alternative means of supplying gas to furnace 10. In this example, gas is provided by gas supply 62 via connecting element 70 to melt chamber nozzle 22 (region 67) at a pressure greater than the static pressure of the melt in the nozzle. When melt chamber stopper 24 is in the raised position, gas bubbles up through the melt in

the melt chamber. When melt chamber stopper **24** is in the lowered position gas flows into meter chamber **14**. Other functions of the furnace are the same as those in the previous examples of the invention.

[0026] **FIG. 6** and **FIG. 7** illustrate a means for providing a continuous supply of a feedstock to the melt chamber. **FIG. 6** illustrates one non-limiting method of supplying the feedstock, in this example, billets, into melt chamber **12**. Two billets, **80** and **80a**, sit on feeder trough **82** which is tilted into the melt chamber to allow the lower billet **80** to be heated and melted into the melt in the melt chamber. As the lower billet melts, the upper billet **80a** slides down trough **82** and is immersed in the melt and melts. An auxiliary induction coil **84** may be used to preheat the upper billet prior to immersion in the melt. Alternatively or in conjunction with the auxiliary coil, waste heat gas from the melt chamber can be channeled around the upper billet to preheat it. Trough **82** may be mounted on adjustable pivot **86** to allow for adjustment of the trough angle into the melt. For a trough angle (between the longitudinal length of the trough and the horizontal surface of the melt in the melt chamber) smaller than that shown in **FIG. 6**, less of the lower billet will be immersed in the melt, and therefore, the billet will melt at a lower rate. Adjustment of the trough angle will be related to the volume of a metered shot of melt from meter chamber **14**. The larger the volume of the meter chamber, the greater the trough angle, since more feedstock must be melted in a given period of time to support a periodic shot of melt from the melt chamber.

[0027] **FIG. 7** illustrates one method of automatically supplying new billets **80c**, **80d** and **80e** to feeder trough **82**. The lengths of these billets on conveyor means **90** are perpendicularly oriented to the lengths of billets **80**, **80a** and **80b** on the feeder trough. A billet sensor means can be provided along feeder trough **82** to sense when billet **80b** has moved down trough **82** to the position of billet **80a** in **FIG. 7**, after billet **80** has melted into the melt in the melt chamber, and billet **80a** has moved to the position of billet **80** in **FIG. 7**. When the billet sensor means senses the aforesaid movement of billets, which leaves the position on trough **82** formerly occupied by billet **80b** unoccupied, conveyor means **90** is activated to move new billet **80c** to transition trough **92**, which delivers billet **80c** in the

proper orientation to the position on trough **82** formerly occupied by billet **80b**. In this manner, a continuous feed of billet feedstock can be supplied to the furnace's melt chamber.

[0028] In other examples of the invention, feedstock may be supplied in alternative suitable forms, such as pre-melted liquid, slurry, or granules, with suitable delivery means for
5 introducing the feedstock into the melt chamber.

[0029] **FIG. 8** represents another example of induction melting furnace **11** of the present invention. Induction furnace **11** includes air lock **13**, melt chamber **15** and meter chamber **36**. In this particular example, flanges **88** join the air lock to the melt chamber, and the melt chamber to the meter chamber. Suitable thermal insulation **19** may be provided
10 around the melt chamber to retain heat in the interior of the chamber. Insulation may also be provided around the meter chamber.

[0030] One or more induction coils, **21a** and **21b**, at least partially surround the exterior of the melting chamber and are connected to one or more high frequency power supplies (not shown in the drawings). In one example of the invention, wherein the melt chamber is
15 primarily induction heated (e.g., a stainless steel melt chamber) a power supply frequency of 3,000 Hertz is suitable. The thickness of the chamber wall is selected to optimize the inductive heating of the chamber from the magnetic field created by the flow of a high frequency current from a power supply through the one or more induction coils. The coils may be air-cooled or water-cooled, and may consist of solid or stranded conductors
20 configured in what is commonly known as Litz wire. Generally, each coil is individually controlled so that current can be independently adjusted in each coil to reflect heating requirements along the height of the crucible. For example, if the height of melt **93** is only to the top of coil **21a** rather than to the top of coil **21b** as shown in **FIG. 8**, then coil **21b** may be de-energized while coil **21a** operates somewhere in the range from half to full current. In one
25 example of the invention, one of the two coils shown in **FIG. 8** may be connected in parallel with a tuning capacitor to form a tank circuit that is passively energized by magnetic coupling with the field generated by current flowing in the other coil when it is connected to a suitable ac power supply. This combination of passive tank coil and active coil results in an overall induction coil circuit with improved power factor. It will be appreciated that there are other

configurations and variations of coil arrangements, with single or multiple coils, that can be used with the induction furnace of the present invention. For example, an orifice induction heater may be additionally provided at the outlet of the melt chamber near meter chamber melt inlet valve **50**. Further the illustration of two coils in **FIG. 8** is not intended to limit the invention to a two-coil configuration. Additionally, an induction coil may be provided around meter chamber **36** to inductively heat the meter chamber and/or the melt in the chamber.

[0031] Air lock **13** is a feed chamber that serves as a means for introducing new feedstock into the melt chamber **15** of the furnace illustrated in **FIG. 8** without disturbing the controlled environment within the melt chamber as further described below. Feedstock for a magnesium alloy melt is a magnesium alloy in suitable solid or semi-solid form. For this example, the feedstock is in the form of billets **91**, although the feedstock could be supplied in other configurations, such as spherical elements.

[0032] Preheater **81** is used to preheat billets **91** to a suitable temperature before injection into air lock **13**. Preheating is done to achieve efficient melting of a billet in the melting chamber. Typically for a magnesium alloy billet, the billet is heated throughout to approximately 400°C, which is somewhat less than the incipient melt temperature of the alloy. For the example shown in **FIG. 8**, the preheater is an induction oven. In other examples, the preheater may be a fossil-fuel fired oven. For the example shown in **FIG. 8**, the preheater utilizes a single induction coil **83**. Other configurations of induction coils are contemplated within the scope of the invention. In one example, an induction coil is provided for each billet to accurately control the heating of each billet in the preheater. A conveyor means (not shown in **FIG. 8**) is used to move the billets through the preheater. Upon demand for additional feedstock in the melting chamber, a billet is ejected from the preheater onto conveyor means **85** for transport through a sealable supply opening **23** (shown in the opened position in **FIG. 8**) in air lock **13**. Once the opening **23** is sealed closed by, for example, lowering door **27**, closed vacuum valve **52** opens to draw a vacuum inside of the sealed airlock. In the non-limiting configuration shown in **FIG. 8**, vacuum pump **54** draws a vacuum on tank **56** prior to the opening of vacuum valve **52** so that the vacuum draw in the

air lock is quickly accomplished. After drawing a vacuum in the air lock, air lock gas supply valve **58** is opened to allow the flow of a gas from gas supply tank **61**. A non-limiting choice of gas is argon. Once the sealed air lock has been flooded with argon to bring it to a pressure approximately equal to the pressure in the melt chamber, sealable delivery opening **25** is
5 opened by, for example, sliding door **29** to the right, to allow a billet **91** (shown in dashed lines) placed in the air lock to enter melt chamber **15**. The billet **91** will be heated and become a part of the melt in the melt chamber, which generally keeps melt **93** at a tap temperature (nominally 700°C for a magnesium alloy) for a metered discharge from the furnace.

10 **[0033]** Furnace **11** in **FIG. 8** operates as a hot heel furnace and always maintains at least a minimum amount of melt **93** inside the melt chamber. When sealable delivery opening **25** is closed (as shown in **FIG. 8**), melt chamber gas supply valve **65** supplies argon to the interior of the melting chamber above the surface of melt **93**. After a billet **91** enters the melting
15 chamber, sealable delivery opening **25** is closed and argon in the sealed air lock is recovered by the argon supply by evacuating the argon from the feed chamber with pump **63**. After argon recovery, the interior of the air lock is vented to atmosphere by opening vent valve **69**, and the air lock is ready for receipt of another billet via sealable supply opening **23**.

[0034] Meter chamber melt inlet valve **50** and outlet valve **79** remain closed until there is a demand for a measured discharge (based on the volume of the meter chamber) of melt **94**.

20 When meter chamber **36** does not contain a measured discharge melt, it is normally filled with argon via opened meter chamber gas supply valve **72**. When a demand for a measured discharge melt is made, meter chamber gas supply valve **72** closes; meter chamber inlet melt valve **50** opens and; alternatively, meter chamber gas exhaust valve **71** opens so that argon displaced by the melt entering the meter chamber flows into the argon volume above the
25 surface of melt **93** in the melt chamber, or pump **74** evacuates argon from the meter chamber to the argon supply immediately before meter chamber melt inlet valve **50** opens. Once the meter chamber is filled, meter chamber melt inlet valve **50** closes and meter chamber melt outlet valve **79** opens to discharge a measured melt **94** into a suitable container **96**, such as a die casting apparatus, casting mold or ladle. After emptying the measured discharge melt **94**

from meter chamber 36, argon is injected back into the meter chamber by opening closed meter chamber gas supply valve 72 to ready the meter chamber for receipt of another measured discharge melt.

[0035] Meter chamber 36 can be fabricated from stainless steel when the melt is a magnesium alloy. Flanges 88 are provided for the inlet and outlet of meter chamber 36 as a convenient means for interchanging meter chambers of varying volumes in furnace 11. In this manner, the furnace can efficiently accommodate containers 96 of varying sizes by discharging an amount of melt that is appropriate for the volume of a particular container.

[0036] Summarizing the overall operation of loading a billet 91 into furnace 11, as illustrated in FIG. 8, with the following initial conditions:

Element	Condition
Sealable supply opening 23	Opened
Sealable delivery opening 25	Closed
Vacuum valve 52	Closed
Vent valve 69	Closed
Air lock gas supply valve 58	Closed

the following steps occur:

billet 91 is injected into air lock 13;

sealable supply opening 23 is closed to seal the interior of the air lock;

vacuum valve 52 opens to draw a vacuum in the air lock;

air lock gas supply valve 58 opens to inject argon into the air lock to bring the interior of the air lock to approximately the same pressure as the pressure in the melt chamber;

sealable delivery opening 25 is opened to allow billet 91 to enter melt chamber 15;

sealable delivery opening 25 is closed after billet 91 has been deposited in the melt chamber;

gas pump **63** reclaims argon from the interior of the air lock to the argon supply (alternatively, this step may be omitted and the argon can be vented to atmosphere in the following step); and

5 gas vent valve **69** opens to bring the inside of the air lock to atmospheric pressure so that sealable supply opening **23** can be reopened for receiving another billet.

[0037] Summarizing the overall operation of discharging a metered discharge melt from furnace **11** with the following initial conditions:

Element	Condition
Meter chamber melt inlet valve 50	Closed
Meter chamber melt outlet valve 79	Closed
Meter chamber gas supply valve 72	Opened
Meter chamber gas exhaust valve 71	Closed

the following steps occur:

meter chamber gas supply valve **72** closes to terminate supply of argon to meter
10 chamber **36**;

alternatively, meter chamber gas exhaust valve **71** opens to allow argon displaced by the filling of the meter chamber with melt to flow into the volume above the melt in the melt chamber, or pump **74** is used to evacuate argon from the meter chamber to the argon supply;

meter chamber melt inlet valve **50** opens to allow melt to fill the meter chamber;

15 meter chamber melt inlet valve **50** closes after the meter chamber is filled;

meter chamber melt outlet valve **79** opens to release the metered discharge melt **94** into a suitable container;

meter chamber gas exhaust valve **71** closes and meter chamber gas supply valve **72** opens to supply argon to the meter chamber as the metered discharge melt leaves the meter
20 chamber; and

meter chamber melt outlet valve **79** closes after the release of the metered discharge melt and the meter chamber is ready for the receipt of melt from the melt chamber.

[0038] While the above examples generally describes the melting and discharge of a molten magnesium alloy, the induction furnace with metered discharge of the present invention has
25 applications within the scope of the invention for use with other materials by making

appropriate modifications as known by one skilled in the art. Further an artisan will appreciate that the supporting vacuum system, protective air supply system, selection of the configuration of furnace openings and valves, and the like, can all be modified without deviating from the scope of the invention.

- 5 **[0039]** The foregoing examples do not limit the scope of the disclosed invention. The scope of the disclosed invention is further set forth in the appended claims.